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Implication of E-Pharmacy Legalization on Medication Safety

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Letter to the Editor

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Dear Editor,

The country of India harbours the second largest population in the world and has therefore got a proportional share of diseased population. Despite having such a vast patient population and established written standards such as the Drugs and Cosmetics Act 1940, the medication sales system in India is unregulated to a conspicuous magnitude. Despite the existence of such chaotic situations, the Indian government inclined on its "Digital India" program is trying to regularise the online pharmacies (e-pharmacies) without weighing the risk and benefits of the same. The concept of e-pharmacy itself undermines the regulations established by the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940 which states that only pharmacists registered under the competent authority has the right to sell medicines; that too under the coverage of an authorized and dated prescription by a registered medical practitioner. On October 2015, the All India Organisation of Chemists and Druggists (AIOCD) had called a nationwide chemists' strike on 14Oct 2015, demanding action from the Centre against considering such regulations which can prove to be financially profitable to the public in a short-run, but can have a paradoxical effect on the healthcare of the country^[1]. With such premonitions, the WHO had called on its member nations in 1997 to tighten the control of e-sales of medications as it apprehended that such practices would bypass national drug regulations^[2]. The medication prices to per capita income ratio is surely on the higher side in India since unlike the developed countries, the prescription charges are not covered by third party payers and hence there is absence of audits to check appropriateness of prescriptions. The current e-pharmacy system simply requires a consumer to upload a prescription and make payment to deliver the medications at a 30-40% cheaper rate than most retail pharmacies. However, such practice has inherent risk of the consumer making purchases using the same prescription multiple times or multiple persons using the same prescription to get the medications^[3]. Although narcotics are not sold through such a system, Medias have reported unrestricted sales of other drugs such as anti-pregnancy pills, sleeping pills and steroids which are potentially harmful if used without proper directions. There may also arise a problem of laymen being unable to discriminate between legal and illegal e-pharmacies which may sell spurious products. A person without medical background maybe unaware of the contraindications associated with drugs or the possible interactions between the drug they purchase online and their routine medications or disease conditions. The practice which is in prevalence in developed countries relies on the basic health literacy of their population and though healthy share Indian may be e-literates, the former competency is lacking in most. Antibiotic purchase through such unchecked systems can further contribute to the development of wide-spread resistance that can impose additional economic burden on the patients. Written regulations which are limited to written documents are not a novelty in India and lack of proper monitoring from competent authorities can turn the tide against the health of the society.

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